
Mundus Imaginalis

Module 6: Amplification, Part 2

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Amplifying the Active Imagination Images

Having discovered the characters at play within your psyche and the active imagination, let's now turn our attention to amplifying the other images in your active imagination.

Once again, to perform this step, go back to the beginning of the active imagination and deal with each image, one at a time.

Amplifying the Setting

Natural environments have followed human beings through evolution, so in that sense there should be strong archetypes related to both objects and events in nature.

Jung was very interested in nature and loved being there. He also claimed that human beings have a need to be in natural environments in order to stay whole and healthy. Especially for our mental health, he argued, it is important to have contact with nature: "Natural life is the nourishing soil of the soul" he said, and: "Human existence should be rooted in the earth" and: "Nature is an incomparable guide if you know how to follow her".

Whilst Jung didn't propose any specific nature archetype, many myths, legends and fairytales are linked to particular types of natural areas, which are also often associated with mythological figures.

The following poem by Baudelaire, illustrates how the setting of the active imagination gives voice to our inner world, pointing towards the road we must travel on our journey towards wholeness, towards individuation, that is becoming all we were born to be.

*Nature is a temple in which living pillars
Sometimes give voice to confused words;
Man passes there through forests of symbols*

Which look at him with understanding eyes

Looking to the active imagination then, is the setting of the active imagination, a forest, a mountain, a meadow, a country, a childhood place?

As we look towards the setting, we ask ourselves, “Do we know this place? What does it remind us of? What does it make us think of? How do we feel?” Amplification is then done by reading about the area in its many dimensions and its characteristics, immersing oneself in appreciating its contours, its textures, its smells.

Let’s take a look at some of these settings and their archetypal meaning.

The forest is a place where life thrives, free from control or cultivation or civilization. Every character we read about who is sent into the woods is likewise brought out, implying that while the woods contribute to the story as a significant obstacle, it is never one that is not eventually conquered. Nevertheless, the character must still travel through it. It is always the woods that stands between defeat and success. In fact, the woods are oftentimes what make the characters’ success possible. They enter the forest with little or no knowledge of how to proceed, but come out self-aware. Not only must our heroes go into the woods but they must go all the way in and confront the darkness that awaits them.

Mountain peaks, where heaven and earth touch, are places of divine revelation. An ascent to a mountain top is a symbol of initiation. Yet, the symbolism of the mountain is not exhausted by the metaphor of spiritual heights. In the mountains, soul and spirit touch each other. The mountains with their luscious fertile valleys and unforgiving peaks, which are referred to as death zones in the Himalayas, seem like an all-encompassing symbol that marries all kinds of dualisms: soul and spirit, spirit and matter, masculine and feminine, life and death. All life and all kinds of treasures come from the mountains—starting with precious metals and finishing with the majority of the world’s freshwater resources.

Often in dreams, large bodies of water (oceans, lakes, pools) symbolize the unconscious. As with bodies of water, we often see the surface, but cannot easily see into the depths. Also, the vastness of the ocean symbolizes the vastness of the unconscious mind.

"The sea is the favourite symbol for the unconscious, the mother of all that lives." (CW 9.1 par 298)

One of the most frequently encountered of water symbols in active imagination is the river and here we see that the river embodies the flow of life, the teleology, as Jungians say, or the goal-directedness of the psyche. It also embodies the fatefully powerful direction of that flow and the flow of our lives.

Another common active imagination setting is that of a car or vehicle of some sort and indicates how we are currently moving or travelling through life or the road we are on.

Amplifying Buildings and Rooms

One of the most common of all dream settings is a house and Jung took the house to be symbolic, a metaphor of the psyche and the rooms representative of our emotions, attitudes and complexes.

Let's take a look at one of Jung's dreams:

"I was in a house I did not know, which had two storeys. It was "my house". I found myself in the upper storey, where there was a kind of salon furnished with fine old pieces in Rococo style. On the walls hung a number of precious, old paintings. I wondered that this should be my house and thought, "Not bad". But then it occurred to me that I did not know what the lower floor looked like. Descending the stairs, I reached the ground floor. There everything was much older. I realised that this part of the house must date from about the fifteenth or sixteenth century. The furnishings were medieval, the floors were of red brick. Everywhere it was rather dark. I went from one room to another, thinking, "Now I really must explore the whole house." I came upon a heavy door and opened it. Beyond it, I discovered a stone stairway that led down into a cellar. Descending again, I found myself in a beautifully vaulted room which looked exceedingly ancient. Examining the walls, I discovered layers of brick among the ordinary stone blocks, and chips of brick in the mortar. As soon as I saw this, I knew that the walls dated from Roman times. My interest by now was intense. I looked more closely at the floor. It was of stone slabs and in one of these I discovered a ring. When I pulled it, the stone slab lifted and again I saw a stairway of narrow stone steps leading down to the depths. These, too, I descended and entered a low cave cut into rock. Thick dust lay on the floor and in the dust were scattered bones and broken pottery, like remains of a primitive culture. I discovered two human skulls, obviously very old, and half disintegrated. Then I awoke." [1]

Jung interpreted the dream along the following lines: the house was a symbol of his psyche or psychology, our homes being amongst the most primal of our collective symbols. The home is where the heart is, as the old saying goes. Our homes are our castles (irrespective of how modest they may be), our sanctuaries. They are sacred ground. The border of the home constitutes a boundary between me and mine and “the world,” “the others”. Its boundaries are designed to keep the unwelcome out and admit the welcome by my invitation. In my home (ideally), I feel contained, safe, held. The home symbolically is an extended psychic body, a manifestation of my soul in the world. And inasmuch as it holds me, it is also a symbol of the mother. This symbolic significance explains much of the cultural rituals and protocols around our homes and their status in our society. Once you become a guest in my home there is a subtle but significant shift in your status from someone-out-there to someone-in-here. The beliefs and cultural norms of the Bedouin tribes are particularly telling in this regard. This also goes some way to explaining the lasting psychological trauma of a home invasion and the frequent need to relocate.

And in the dream, Jung is clear that it is not just any house but his house, “my house”. Once one is armed with the concept of the collective unconscious, the rest follows fairly organically. Of course, Jung himself wasn’t, so the reading he birthed is a testament to his genius. As he descends the various layers of his house, he is descending the layers of his own psychology, psyche or soul. What he discovers is that each successive layer connects him with an earlier time in man’s history and the history of his ancestral line and also casts an increasingly wide net so that his interconnectedness to his fellow man is increased. Or perhaps it is better stated to say he is increasingly connected to an ever-wider group of fellow human beings who share, at the various levels, his ancestry. Such that he begins in his personal living space on the upper floor and ends in the shared prehistoric roots of all mankind.

One of the most frequent uses of places in dreams is to show you whose turf you are on, whose influence you are under. So, a good way to understand the significance of a place is to ask who it belongs to.

When analysing houses and building in your active imagination, try to remember the shape of the buildings, the condition of the house or room and how you felt in each room. Was the room tidy / disorganised, messy, familiar / unfamiliar.

In Jungian terms then, the kitchen could be a metaphor for the alchemical lair, the place where substances are transformed as in the cooking process. The bathroom could then be a metaphor for a place of cleansing and we could ask ourselves what needs to be cleaned? The bedroom could be a metaphor for the place we get into bed with someone else and so represents a place of intimacy, connectedness, relatedness, or a place where we meet our subconscious and unconscious through our dreams and deep sleep. The dining room could be a metaphor for the place we nourish ourselves and others and could represent how we are seeking to be nourished or to nourish others. The laundry could be a metaphor for the place that we store or clean our dirty linen and here the pun is apparent. And so on.

The unconscious is often thought of as being divided into rooms where we keep or hide different memories or aspects of ourselves. Opening a door and entering a room generally symbolises a willingness to enter and face areas that are normally hidden from you. Rooms also symbolise an aspect of your personality. Note the condition of the room. As the house typically represents the self, an unfinished house, or one in poor repair, may be pointing out to the work required on some aspects of mind or body.

Ask yourself, “What part of me is it that feels like that, thinks like that, behaves like that? Where have I seen it functioning in my life lately? Where have I seen this characteristic at work in my life lately?”

Amplifying Animals

Just as people have characteristics that you can identify with, so do animals, often representing our instinctual nature, an involuntary drive towards certain activities. Here Jung tells us that:

“All psychic processes whose energies are not under conscious control are instinctive.”
(*Definitions, CW 6, par. 765.*)

Jung identified five prominent groups of instinctive factors: creativity, reflection, activity, sexuality and hunger. Hunger is a primary instinct of self-preservation, perhaps the most fundamental of all drives. Sexuality is a close second, particularly prone to psychization, which makes it possible to divert its purely biological energy into other channels. The urge to activity manifests in travel, love of change, restlessness and play.

Under reflection, Jung included the religious urge and the search for meaning. Creativity was for Jung in a class by itself. His descriptions of it refer specifically to the impulse to create art.

When amplifying animals, look to their nature, to their instinctive drives to uncover what is activated or activating within your psyche. Ask yourself, “Where do I see that same trait in my personality? What part of me is it that feels like that, thinks like that, behaves like that? Where have I seen it functioning in my life lately? Where have I seen this characteristic at work in my life lately?”

Application

Amplify the Images in Your Active Imagination

Amplify the images in your active imagination—the setting, the buildings, the rooms, the animals, the shapes and so on.

Then ask yourself, “Where do I see that same trait in my personality? What part of me is it that feels like that, thinks like that, behaves like that? Where have I seen it functioning in my life lately? Where have I seen this characteristic at work in my life, lately?”

RECOMMENDED READING

Man and His Symbols conceived and edited by Carl Jung

Tracking the Gods – The Place of Myth in Modern Life by James Hollis

Mythologems – Incarnations of the Invisible World by James Hollis

Animal Guides in Life, Myth and Dreams by Neil Russack